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THE WORLD OF THE BAMA **Aboriginal-European Relations in the Cairns** **Rainforest Region to 1876**

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The world of the Djabugay-Yidiny [Jabuguy-Yidin] speaking people occupied what is now called the Cairns rainforest region. Their term for themselves is BAMA [Bum-ah] — meaning ‘people’.

To the south are Dyirbal [Jirrbal] speaking tribes who are linguistically different from their northern Yidiny-speakers, as German is to French. There appears to have been quite a deal of animosity¹ between these linguistically different neighbours.

To the north are the Kuku-Yalanji [Kookoo Ya-lan-ji] who seem to have a great deal more in common with their southern Djabugay-speaking neighbours.

In the northern half of the Cairns rainforest region are the Djabugay-speaking tribal groupings; the Djabuganydji [Jabu-gan-ji], the Nyagali [Na-kali], the Guluy [Koo-lie], the Buluwanydji [Bull-a-wan-ji], and on the coastal strip, the Yirrganydji [Yirr-gan-ji].² The clans within each tribal grouping spoke dialects of Djabugay — so that, although there were differences, they were mutually understandable.³ The southern half of the Cairns rainforest region is home to the linguistically related Yidiny-speaking people. Fifty-three percent of the Yidiny lexicon is derived from Djabugay.⁴ However in the same fashion as the Djabugay-speakers — each clan, and there are many in each tribe,⁵ considered itself an entity in its own right, despite the linguistic affinities.

The tribes who spoke Yidiny-related dialects were the Gungganydji [Kung-gan-ji], the Yidinydji [Yidin-ji], the Madjanydji [Mad-jan-ji], and Wanjuru.

Despite the dialectic variations, there were still other aspects of their social, cultural and ritual life which shared a common thread not the least of which was the unique rainforest and reef environment. However, the central aspect of BAMA [Bum-ah] life was the all pervasiveness of their beliefs stemming from BULURRU [Bool-oo-roo] — Religion/Law — which influenced every aspect of BAMA life, including their daily and seasonal activities. This was the factor that invading Europeans or GADJA [Gad-ja] failed to understand, and has lead to the tragedy which has become the unspoken history of Australia.

A part of BULURRU [Bool-oo-roo] — Religion/Law — are the Storywaters, a term covered elsewhere in Australia by the word ‘dreamings’.

These stories relate to specific localities within the BULMBA — country/homeland — of the Djabugay-Yidiny speaking BAMA of north Queensland. Such places, be they mountain or rocky outcrop, pool, creek or waterfall, are associated with the Storytime, the time of the world’s making and the travels and exploits of ancestral beings. Such places are BULURRU, Storyplaces or Storywaters, for immanent within them is a sacred ancestral presence transmuted into geography. The Storytime is inscribed on the body of the land as it was upon the very bodies of the initiated who bore the signs of their making — WADIRR [Wad-ear] or initiatory cicatrices, on the shoulders, chest and stomach.

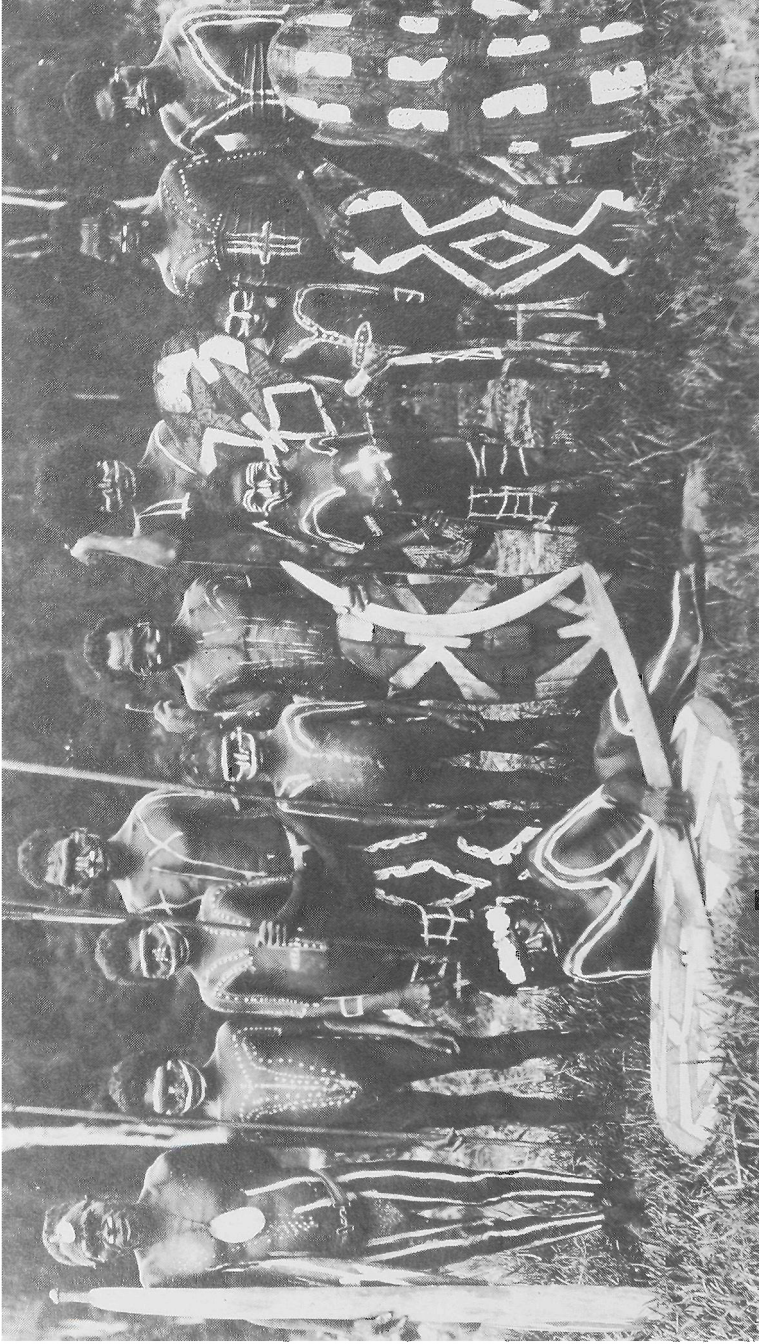
The BULURRU ancestors “put” things in their place, creating all the different varieties of MA: or vegetable foods, and MINYA — flesh foods, for people’s sustenance and showing them how to procure them. They endowed the people with material culture which mediated their survival as hunters and gatherers: the knowledge of how to make weapons, traps, tools, utensils, shelters and so on, the techniques for hunting various types of game and for preparing a diversity of food-stuffs, some like BADIL [Ba-dill], the cycas nut, and YIWURRA [Yi-in Djabugay, or DJUNGURA [Jung-ga-rah] in Yidiny — the Black Bean; both are dangerously toxic unless processed correctly. They endowed the people with a way of life founded on an intimate knowledge of the environment, on knowing where to find sustenance at different times of the year. Following up the country’s seasonal resources the BAMA followed in the tracks of their ancestors who had revealed the way to them and had established the laws and customs of social life. The BULURRU ancestors instituted the social institutions that regulated marriage, enabling society to reproduce itself, the law which guided it and the aesthetic by which that life was celebrated by art, song and dance.

Dealing with the origin of things, of how the world came to be, these stories are of the nature of dealing with the creation of the universe and its inhabitants — the BAMA equivalent of the Book of Genesis. They reveal a sacred path to be followed, a binding contract to be kept: for the telling of a creation story is the occasion of a re-creation, a re-presentation, a confirmation of the essential relations between BAMA and BULMBA, the people and their world, their country, their homeland. BULURRU links the past with the present, the land with the people, the people with the ancestral law. These stories articulate the land, a people . . . the BAMA.

These stories speak the country, revealing it to be not a wilderness, but a humanised world, partaking of the spirit of the ancestors, their blood, their bones, their story, ever-present in the land and its creatures.⁶

It was, nevertheless, in the physical world that the GADJA — Europeans — first as visitors, then as invaders, made judgement on the BAMA. The habitable place or BULMBA is a term which covers a wide range of meanings: “it is a home, the camp, the homeland, the world, land, sea, sky and even time itself.”⁷ The Djabugay-Yidiny speakers were not nomads, their annual cycle of activities were based upon and regulated by seasonal changes.⁸ If you knew what resources were in season and their location, you would have little difficulty in locating a clan group. When there was a profusion of food sources, tribal and inter-tribal gatherings were conducted, where ceremonial rituals and the official settling of quarrels amongst individuals on duelling grounds occurred.

The unintentional psychological dispossession of BAMA identity began with Captain Cook’s renaming DJILIBIRRI [Jilli-birri] — Barramundi Head — Cape Grafton. The history of BAMA-GADJA relations in far north Queensland is fraught with misunderstandings. The examples of recorded contact between the early GADJA navigators and the coastal BAMA in south-east Cape York Peninsula, and for that matter, the whole of Cape York Peninsula, seem to have the same factors operating. Such instances occurred in Gogo-Yimidjir [Googoo-Yimi-jeer] territory, at the Endeavour River in 1770 with James Cook and his crew,⁹ and at Rockingham Bay, in Dyirball-speaking territory, with the crew of HMS *Fly* in 1843. In these and many other incidents, the GADJA were treated in a friendly manner until they transgressed the local BAMA’s right of territoriality and possessions of resources, in this instance: the fish.¹⁰ For BAMA territoriality extended beyond the beach line and included marine sources.¹¹ Restraint was shown towards the GADJA: however, when transgressions occurred it seems that the BAMA were more intent in punishing the GADJA transgressors than actually killing them. It would be possible for the BAMA to have extracted much heavier casualties on the visitors by ambushing them, than the more open approaches that occurred.



Madjay speaking Madjanydji near Babinda in c.1893, showing the BAGURR (wooden sword), BALURR (curved woomera) and BIGUNU (large shield carved from a ficus buttress). The BURRIBURRU (male elder) on the left is BURUMBU.

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Contact between BAMA groups and the crews of the Royal Navy show restraint on both sides, but with the increase of private vessels plying the northern waters, violence and misunderstandings also grew.

From 1848 onwards, references can be found to the presence of Europeans on off-shore islands.¹² Beche-de-mer fishing was accepted as relatively commonplace, even in 1849.

However, a major problem, then and today, was the lumping together of many tribal groupings on Cape York Peninsula, and citing the sporadic negative contacts as examples of the ‘savage’ and ‘aggressive’ nature of the ‘bad blacks of the north’. Sydney newspapers highlighted these aspects. Such examples ranged from the 1606 Dutch contact with the Wik Ngathan [Wik-Nutan] at Cape Keerweer, where nine crewmen were killed for interfering with local women, to the spearing of Gilbert in 1845 on Ludwig Leichhardt’s expedition, which has been shown to have been accidental, as the attack “was a punishing raid launched in retaliation for one or more offences committed a week earlier.”¹³

This attack occurred over 300 kilometres from Djabugay-Yidiny speaking territory, and Kennedy’s death in 1848 happened near the tip of Cape York. And yet these diverse incidents contributed to the growing negative view of *all* tribal groups on the peninsula.

Certainly the unchecked increase of beche-de-mer fishing along the northern coastline lead to many unfortunate incidents, although it does not appear to have become widespread until after the 1870’s. Walter Roth, the Northern Protector of Aborigines, wrote to the Home Secretary’s office in 1898 stating that the

whole story of the beche-de-mer trade which, until my arrival here and opportunity of inquiry, I could hardly credited, is one long record of brutal cruelty, bestiality and debauchery: my heart bleeds at what has come to my knowledge.¹⁴

The first relatively detailed report of a private beche-de-mer expedition occurs in mid-December 1857, on the Gungganydji island of WANYAMI [One-ya-me] — or Place of the Haunted Spirits, otherwise called Green Island. J.S.V. Mein claimed that he was on the island for several months before making his way to Timor.¹⁵

The most northerly GADJA settlement in 1861 was at Port Denison, which was called Bowen, after the then Governor. Also at this time George Elphinstone Dalrymple had become Commissioner of Lands in the Kennedy District and participated in the expansion of the settlement.¹⁶

Bruce Breslin, in his revisionist history thesis, cogently argues that

if any claims were to be isolated as examples of exaggerating Aboriginal hostility, the one which would readily qualify would be those of Dalrymple — and his biographer.

Dalrymple had no intention of avoiding bloodshed and establishing good communications with the Aborigines. What he said and what he did were often two different things . . . [he] . . . showed from the very beginning he would arm and alarm the frontier.¹⁷

The evidence of Dalrymple's involvement in the establishment of Cardwell, and later as Officer in Charge of the Queensland North-east Coast Expedition, undoubtedly substantiates these assertions; and therefore is profoundly important in the establishment of European attitudes and hence their future treatment of the BAMA in the Cairns rainforest region.

It was from Cardwell that the rescuers of the survivors of the wreck *Maria* came in 1872, as well as a savage retribution party.¹⁸ Most importantly Cardwell took over from Bowen as the most northerly out-post in colonial Queensland, and was so for a decade, until Cooktown sprang to prominence after 1873.

Dalrymple was not alone in his promulgation of the lie that Aboriginal people were hostile and that corresponding severity was therefore required to 'civilise' them. The psychological background to this attitude was laid with the conclusions of the Report of the Select Committee on the Native Police in 1861. Despite substantial evidence to the contrary, the Chairman, R.R. MacKenzie, brought down what amounted to a verdict. The

evidence taken by . . . [the] . . . committee shews [sic] beyond doubt that all attempts to Christianize or educate the Aborigines of Australia have hitherto proved abortive . . . invariably they return to their savage habits. Credible witnesses shew [sic] that they are addicted to cannibalism; that they have no idea of a future state; and are sunk in the lowest depths of barbarism.¹⁹

The excesses of the Native Police were therefore blamed, not the system itself, but "the inefficiency, the indiscretion, and the intemperate habits of some of the officers."²⁰

It would seem that while the larger pastoralists to the south of the future Cairns district viewed it as necessary to consider Aborigines as hostile in order to remove them from the land they wished to use, it was probably less complicated for the smaller settlers. They were afraid and unable to understand the BAMA and their cultural heritage, and the BAMA threatened their chance at creating a new life.

Nevertheless the march of the GADJA encroachment continued on its northerly route from Cardwell. It would seem that Phil Garland was the first GADJA to be involved in a significant clash in this region, probably with the Yirrganydji. According to Sub-Inspector Johnstone, Garland called the area where Cairns was later built, 'Battle Camp'. He did this "because it was here he had a big fight and a very narrow escape from the blacks when watering his cutter for the use of his camp at the fishing station on Green Island."²¹

More details were given by J.W. Collinson when he stated that the

fracas at Battle creek in 1870 was ascribed to the theft of . . . [a] . . . canoe. Later a prominent Government official at Cooktown publicly stated that if the people of Cairns had trouble with the natives it could be traced back to that event.²²

The major point about all contact to date seems to be the GADJA's inability to accept that they were trespassing on BAMA BULMBA. However, there were many Europeans who did attempt to understand the BAMA position. One such person was J.F. Mann, who in 1883 observed that the Aborigines

are particular in all points of etiquette, consequently many a man has lost his life by unconsciously infringing their rules — such as walking into a camp without first obtaining leave. This may be considered equivalent to a person walking into a stranger's house and sitting down without being asked. In one case the intruder gets a knock on the head which settles him at once, in the other he is kicked out.²³

This insight has particular import when considering the major conflicts between the Gogo-Yimidjir and GADJA miners around Cooktown, where by 1877, within a space of five years, some 17,000 Chinese and 1,400 Europeans had invaded the area.²⁴ This is also salient in attempting to understand the BAMA perspective with the upsurge of contact in the Cairns rainforest region in the 1870's.

The wreck of the *Maria* in 1872 on Bramble Reef, to the south of Cairns, and the subsequent story of the survivors became part of white folk-lore. Even to the extent that the Cutten brothers, when establishing themselves near Kurramine Beach, ten years later, were frequently warned "that the blackfellows would kill and eat them, as they had done the crew of the brig *Maria*."²⁵ The astonishing point is that the evidence does not substantiate this interpretation. An important development for the GADJA invasion was the extension of the telegraph to Cardwell in 1870,²⁶ and this enabled the news of the wreck to travel quickly down south to Brisbane and Sydney. It was later to have importance in the Cairns region in utilising the Native Mounted Police more effectively against the BAMA.



Blady-grass village, believed photographed by A.A. White of 1904 Bellenden-Ker Expedition south-south-east of the saddle between BUNDA DJARRUIGA MURRGU (Walsh's Pyramid) on the right, and Mt. Massie on the left.

Below: Photograph, believed to be from the same source and taken from Mud Island in Mutcheroo Inlet looking towards Tighe's Creek (up the Mulgrave River on the left). John Oxley Library



In 1872, GADJA views on the BAMA were cementing, but with the exception of Garland's clash, and the occasional beche-de-mer coastal contact, the BAMA of the Cairns rainforest region were relatively untouched. This was not to last for much longer. The killing of the two beche-de-mer fishermen in early April 1873, on WANYAMI or Green Island, has since been grandly identified as a massacre. Two aspects concern us, the first is that the three Aboriginal men and two women were 'induced' to join the cutter at the Palm Islands to the south. Johnstone's comments on this are pertinent in that

the manner of 'inducing' the aboriginals to join the service is very like the old 'press-gang' business — "You need not unless you like, but you must!" I will not say it was in this case, but it was so in many others.²⁷

The second point was that the Aboriginal men were forced to sleep on board ship, while the women had to stay with the beche-de-mer fishermen — good reason for the retribution that followed. In response to this incident, Sub-Inspector Johnstone visited the island and then travelled back to Cardwell via Gunganydji, Madjanydji and Wanjuru territory. Johnstone was the only GADJA amongst his Native Troopers, and it is likely that the several clashes that occurred were on the basis of this group being strangers, and therefore trespassers and enemies.

A second 'Green Island Massacre' in July 1873 resulted in four beche-de-mer fishermen being killed. Suffice to say that whatever happened the 'Dalrymple Line' was becoming firmly established, and what amounted to two separate incidents of murder, involving a total of six men, became two 'massacres'!

In September 1873 Dalrymple was instructed via telegraph to take command of the Queensland North East Coast Expedition at Cardwell. Shortly after this, James Mulligan's report on gold on the Palmer River became known. The Queensland Government needed to have more information about the far northern coastal district. This was later to prove beneficial when planning for the gold rush to the Palmer River. An interesting aspect of Dalrymple's Narrative and Report are the contradictory ways in which the landing parties report on their reception by the various BAMA groups. Every shore party is always mentioned as being accompanied by the Native Mounted Police who were armed with Snider carbines.²⁸ There are many examples where Dalrymple has made assumptions with regard to the BAMA. Despite Forster's published account in 1872²⁹ of his survival from the wreck of the 'Maria', and the kindness he received from the BAMA, Dalrymple still manages to state, that as the expedition passed Perry's Point, "nine unarmed helpless starving Englishmen were murdered in cold blood by these blood thirsty savages."³⁰ At almost

every opportunity the man makes assumptions about the BAMA which are not only misleading and emotive, but determined to prejudice the reader against the local inhabitants. His approach is understandable as, when he concludes his report, he expresses the opinion that “the whole of the valuable agricultural coast country just discovered is free from vested interests injurious to its rapid development, and is now open to public selection.”³¹

In other words, Dalrymple does not consider the BAMA's presence and association with their land as legitimate and therefore they are not candidates for the term ‘vested interests’. Dalrymple's coverage of his party's intrusion into BAMA camps is quite incredible. After approximately fourteen years in North Queensland, this noted expeditionary leader was either deliberately ignoring, or ignorant of, the fact that “It is the custom with most of the Australian natives for newcomers, whether they be the most intimate relations or strangers, to approach a camp with decorum.”³² There were many occasions where the GADJA not only violated territoriality, but also correct etiquette in approaching BAMA villages. It is also worth noting BAMA procedures in relation to duelling or fighting contests. Karl Lumholtz gives an account of one such gathering, where

as soon as our men had halted, three men from the hostile ranks came forward in a threatening manner . . . running forward in long elastic leaps. Now and then they jumped high in the air like cats, and fell down behind their shields . . . This manoeuvre was repeated until they came within twenty yards from our men; then they halted . . . ready for the fight. The large crowd of strange tribes followed them slowly. Now the duels were to begin; three men came forward from our side and accepted the challenge. The duel usually began with spears, then they came nearer to each other and took to their swords . . . they are seldom wounded . . . [however] . . . the spears easily penetrate the shields, and sometimes injure the bearer, who is then regarded as disqualified and must declare himself beaten.”³³

Yet the men from Dalrymple's expedition on two occasions walked into BAMA camp sites uninvited and when men in traditional duelling fashion challenged them, they were fired upon. The major factor here is that, had the BAMA wished to attack the GADJA, they would have ambushed them, not approached them in the open manner of the duelling contest.

As Henry Reynolds has observed

Harsh racist views were obviously convenient to a community engaged in dispossessing a native people and perhaps some such doctrine was psychologically necessary to the pioneer or to those aware of the conditions on the frontier of settlement.³⁴

The euphemistic language utilised on the frontier demonstrates the psychological framework being constructed by the GADJA. Charles

Heydon, who was on the *Governor Blackall* sent from Sydney for the *Maria* search, stated

private persons go out to kill blacks, and call it 'snipe shooting'. Awkward words are always avoided, you will notice 'Shooting a snipe' sounds better than 'murdering a man'. But the blacks were never called men and women and children; 'myalls', and 'niggers', and 'gins', and 'piccaninnies' seem further removed from humanity.³⁵

Here again, one can see that there were GADJA with insight and humanity towards the BAMA. The problem was basically swept under the carpet and ignored by the authorities.

The funeral practices of Cairns coastal BAMA involved mummification during the Dry Season, or GURRAMINYA [Goo-ra-min-yah], and, generally, burial during GURRABANA [Goo-ra-ban-ah], or Wet Season. After approximately nine months³⁶ the body may have been cremated.³⁷ Close relatives might also carry remains of their loved ones around in their shoulder bags on their seasonal movements. It is these remains which the GADJA noticed in the BAMA camps that reinforced the idea of the prevalence of cannibalism. Geoffrey Bolton feels that there "is some indication that cannibalism was rare before the coming of the white man, who, however, was ready to credit Aborigines with man-eating and soon found proofs which appeared to carry conviction."³⁸

To what degree GADJA were capable of distinguishing between supposed human remains, preserved mummies or parts thereof, and local animals such as the cassowary, merely adds to the uncertainty of the debate. It appears that Dalrymple was quite willing to jump to the conclusion of cannibalism, which would then excuse his own aggressive behaviour. The mortuary practices of the BAMA were to have ramifications far beyond anything which might have been envisaged. It was proof-positive to the GADJA of the savage barbarity of the original inhabitants, and an excuse which justified GADJA civilisation considering itself morally correct in displacing the BAMA.

Similarly, the attitude which enabled the taking of a mummified female body by Sub-Inspector Johnstone from the mouth of the Russell/Mulgrave River in Madjanydji territory, demonstrated the lack of regard the GADJA held for the BAMA and their dead. A tomahawk and blankets were left in compensation.³⁹ This offensive and sacrilegious act was justified by Dalrymple when he implied that the human remains were barely that, as the "head of the mummy is small — the animal organs being developed to distortion, the mental being next to nil; in fact, it is the very lowest type of human formation."⁴⁰ A theft of this nature, after such peaceful co-existence, would no doubt have angered and puzzled the Madjanydji. Word of the GADJA's

actions would have spread among the BAMA inhabitants. This was not the only time Johnstone or other GADJA took mummified BAMA bodies.⁴¹ It did little to encourage goodwill for future contact. Certainly the attack the following year in 1874 on a party of timber-getters led by Daniel Hart, six miles up the Russell River, might suggest this.⁴² The same party of men took the food from a BAMA group at Island Point, now Port Douglas, several days later. Just as Hart and his mates had borne the brunt of retribution from the actions of Johnstone, then no doubt others would be held responsible for their actions.

Along with the myriad of other GADJA acquisitions from BAMA camps, including mummies, it is symptomatic of the pervading European view that the BAMA were an inferior people. The cruel irony is that there were GADJA who perceived that 'our early methods of 'civilisation' were sadly at fault'.⁴³ The author of an encyclopaedic volume on Queensland, at the turn of the century, acknowledged that

Much of the butchery — and there was a great deal of it in the early days — may safely be attributed to ignorance of the way of the blacks, unwanted violation of their rites, the kidnapping of their women, and the practice, established into a rule and to some extent legalised by the native police, of shooting them down like dogs, to display the supremacy of the whites, and the improved weapons in their possession.⁴⁴

It is a tragedy that it took thirty-six years from Dalrymple's pronouncement for this insight to surface. The even greater tragedy is that it sank before the 'glossing' waves of twentieth century Australian historians.

With Mulligan's further gold discoveries, and the establishment of Thornborough in the Cairns hinterlands, in June of 1876, the government arranged for two exploratory road expeditions to find a closer seaport for the export of the minerals. This led to several exploring parties searching for a track to Trinity Inlet, and by the first week in October, in the period of DJUGALAWURDJI [Jur-gal-a-worjee] — heathaze — of GURRAMINYA [Goo-ra-min-yah] — Dry Season — in the GADJA year of 1876, the BAMA BULMBA truly came under siege.

BAMA BULURRU would survive relatively intact until the dawn of the twentieth century, but the habitable place where the BAMA 'nested' was irrevocably under threat. The home of the heroic Story Water character — DJARRUGAN [Ja-roo-gan] — scrub hen — may, as a symbol of BAMA 'ownership' of their BULMBA (or it of them) be seen as representative of their loss when GADJA ignored its heritage and renamed it Walsh's Pyramid. This period was indeed the beginning of the end.

ENDNOTES

The author acknowledges Michael Quinn and Roy Banning for permission to quote extracts from their work, BULURRU STORYWATERS and Cairns Historical Society and John Oxley Library for access to their historical photos.

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13. B. Dalton, "The Death of John Gilbert during Leichhardt's First Expedition", Paper read to: From Berlin to Burdekin Conference, University of N.S.W., 25 March, 1989.
14. W.E. Roth, "Cooktown to Home Secretary's Office", 4 February, 1898, Q.S.A., COL/139.
15. See Q.S.A., COL/A155, No.1111, of 1871, for a letter from Mein claiming a reward from the Queensland Government for first discovering lands between Cape Grafton and the Bellenden Ker Range.
16. G.C. Bolton, *A Thousand Miles Away*, (Canberra, 1975), pp.18-19.
17. B. Breslin, "Extermination with Pride", J.C.U.(Hons.), pp.87-90.
18. This retaliatory party left Cardwell in the requisitioned 'Peri', and massacred members of the DYIRBAL-speaking Djiru people who lived on the mainland opposite what is now called Dunk Island. See also J. Moeresby, *Two Admirals*, (London, 1913), p.224; J. Moeresby, *New Guinea and Polynesia Discoveries and Surveys in New Guinea and D'Entrecasleaux Islands*, (London, 1876), p.41; W.T. Forster, *The Wreck of the 'Maria' or Adventures of the New Guinea Prospecting Association*, (Sydney, 1872), p.32.
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38. Bolton, *A Thousand Miles Away*, (Canberra, 1972), p.7.
39. Dalrymple, *Qld. North East Coast Expedition*, p.46.
40. Ibid., p.28.
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42. See W.T. Johnstone, "Early European Contact with Aborigines of the Present Mulgrave Shire Area Up to the End of Year 1889", *Mulgrave Shire Historical Society, Bulletin* No.54, February, 1983; also "The Petition of Daniel Hart", *Queensland Heritage*, Vol.3, No.2, May, 1975, p.24.
43. *Queensland*, Alcazar Press, (Brisbane, 1900), Chapter X, p.89.
44. Ibid.